

Best Practice Approaches to Truancy Reduction: Information for School Attendance Officers

The most effective truancy reduction strategies include activities implemented across a continuum of supports within an equitable Multi-Level System of Support (MLSS). While school systems and staff have many tools to increase attendance rates and reduce truancy of individuals, it is possible School Attendance Officers may encounter some youth and families in need of additional interventions and support. Wisconsin Law does allow for youth to be referred to the Youth Justice system for Habitual Truancy. For this reason, it is important to understand how Wisconsin's Youth Justice system operates and how it can most appropriately be leveraged to provide support when needed.

The Purpose of Truancy Laws

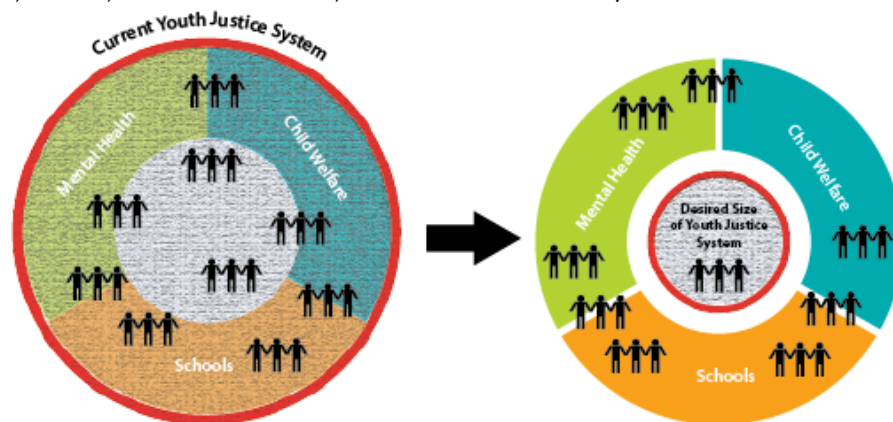
It is helpful for school staff to keep the purpose of truancy reduction in mind when approaching policy and practice considerations. Wisconsin educators strive for high graduation rates with healthy and well students. Since regularly missing school has a significant impact on student achievement and positive youth development, truancy laws aim to deter students from skipping school, encourage students to attend, and encourage caregivers to get kids to school. The hope is to ultimately increase graduation rates, improve the workforce, build community, support wellbeing, reduce the risk of negative outcomes, and increase protective factors and positive outcomes.

The Purpose of Truancy Laws are meant to:	The Purpose of Truancy Laws are NOT meant to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> deter skipping school encourage student attendance encourage caregivers to get kids to school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shame and blame increase the school-to-prison pipeline reduce connection to the school system impose fines on families as a first step

Truancy and the Youth Justice System

Wisconsin's Youth Justice (YJ) system is tasked with protecting the community, imposing accountability for violations of law, and equipping juvenile offenders with the competencies to live responsibly and productively. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) assumed responsibility for fiscal and programmatic oversight for the community-based YJ system in 2016, which is designed to serve the greatest number of youth through local prevention and diversion services to reduce the number of youth who enter deeper into the YJ system.

DCF's vision for the YJ system is that it focuses on prevention and diversion and provides accountability and services to youth and families in a system that prepares them to thrive. The goal is to meet youth and family needs in the system that is best able to do so. **Youth Justice system involvement can do more harm than good for youth who are unlikely to engage in future delinquent behavior or whose primary needs would best be met by a different system** (Seigle, Walsh, and Weber 2014; Salsich & Trone 2013).



The youth justice system encompasses youth with a variety of primary needs other than delinquent behavior.

Youth are served in the appropriate system, and are not brought into the youth justice system in order to address other primary needs.



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A range of community, school, family, and student characteristics have been found to contribute to the problem of truancy – underscoring the need for collaborative, developmentally appropriate interventions that are matched to a youth's primary needs. Through the DCF [2016 input gathering](#) process, a vision emerged related to cross-system collaboration with schools in regards to truancy to ensure youth are not unnecessarily brought into the YJ system. Ideally:

- Schools, human services, and law enforcement have clearly defined roles and regular collaboration.
- There is a clear and consistent statewide approach to truancy that diverts youth from the YJ system and addresses any underlying school and family-system needs contributing to truancy.

Strategies for Schools

Proactively Communicate with Families about District Policies and Absences

If a student is absent without an acceptable excuse for all or part of one or more days during which school is held, they are considered truant under Wis. Stat. § [118.16\(1\)\(a\) and \(c\)](#). “Part of day” is defined by school districts and may vary across the state. For this reason, it is important that schools are proactively communicating with students and caregivers about their specific policies and procedures related to attendance enforcement. Best practice includes using a supportive and strengths-based approach to communications with parents and caregivers prior to imposing punitive measures, fines, or sanctions. In addition to the automated phone calls that families receive notifying them of an unexcused absence, when teachers reach out to parents and caregivers with a personal phone call, (or second best, an email) this action can go a long way in communicating caring about the student.

★ Resources

- [Welcome Letters for Back to School](#) - Attendance Works
- [Handouts for Families](#) (various languages) - Attendance Works

Home School Program Attendance

It is important to note per Wis. Stat. § [118.15\(4\)](#), homeschooling that meets specific criteria may be substituted for attendance at a public or private school. Under current law, homeschooling parents are required to file the online PI-1206 homeschool report annually, on or before October 15. Under Wis. Stat. § [115.30\(3\)](#), no school district can compel the submission of the form prior to October 15. If a parent communicates to their resident district their intent to homeschool their student(s), a district should consider that sufficient notice up to the October 15 deadline to submit a PI-1206 form.

Attendance Improvement Planning

If a student is absent without an acceptable excuse for all or part of five or more days during a school semester, they meet the definition of habitually truant. Schools *may* refer students who are habitually truant to juvenile court intake or municipal court **only after** satisfying the steps detailed in Wis. Stat. § [118.16\(5\)](#). One of the steps schools must follow is to meet with a parent to discuss the student's truancy.

Attendance Meeting Best Practices

- Habitual truancy notification letters are written using trauma-sensitive and simpler language and fewer words to improve their effectiveness.
- Schools develop attendance improvement plans that are led by student and parent perspectives, goals, and needs.



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- When parents or students are unable to attend a meeting, school staff make other attempts to get information from them, and should still create an improvement plan.
- School leaders consider how the system itself may be contributing to the issue. There is strong evidence that it is these aspects of school environments – safety, caring adults, academic support, and interesting and relevant classes – that impact whether or not students attend school regularly when they have a choice (Eastman et al. 2007).
- School leaders set dates for follow-up meetings to ensure improvement plans are being implemented effectively and, if not, make adjustments including additional layers of support.
- Improvement plans may include changes to a student's schedule and increased attendance expectations over a time period, and curricular modifications.
- Only after the attendance improvement process fails to resolve the student's habitual truancy over time, schools may refer students to juvenile court intake or municipal court.

★ Resources

- [Writing truancy notices that can improve attendance](#) - Attendance Works Blog
- [Sample Notice of Truancy](#) - Attendance Works
- [Student Attendance Success Plans](#) - Attendance Works
- [Example Habitual Truancy Letter per 118.16\(2\)\(cg\)](#) - DPI

Importance of Seeing the Whole Picture

A range of community, school, family, and student characteristics have been identified that contribute to the problem of truancy:

Community	School	Family	Student
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unsafe path to/from school.• Poor transportation.• Negative peer influences.• Financial, social, medical, or other barriers that pressure students to stay home to help with family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bullying.• Undiagnosed disability.• Pressure for academic success.• Lack of culturally relevant or engaging instruction.• Unwelcoming/unsafe school climate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Housing and food insecurity.• Conflicting family responsibilities/obligations.• Negative attitudes of parents due to their own school experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unmet mental health needs.• Frequent school changes/low feeling of belonging.• A need to work.• Challenges with academic performance.• Substance abuse.

(Balfanz and Byrnes 2012; AttendanceWorks n.d.-b.; Developmental Services Group, Inc. 2010)

The Importance of a Continuum of Support

A continuum of support includes strong universal and prevention practices, with additional supports added, as needed, based on data and student voice. It should be noted research suggests youth may be chronically absent for multiple reasons spanning several different categories – underscoring the importance of using a continuum of supports rooted in prevention, as well as a collaborative approach with other systems to address unmet needs. The most effective truancy strategies are multi-leveled, with early interventions provided by schools and community agencies and the justice system acting as a “last resort” for a much smaller number of youth and families requiring more intensive support (Weber 2020; George 2011; Attendance Works n.d.-a.).



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★ Resources for Multi-Levelled Response

- [Attendance Works 3 Tiers of Intervention](#)
- [Future Ed and Attendance Works Attendance Playbook](#)
- [Waukesha County Example](#) (scroll to the bottom of page)

Trauma Sensitive Approach

When a student is identified as habitually truant, school staff are encouraged to follow procedures outlined in state statute in a trauma-sensitive manner.

- Attention must be paid to avoid practices that further punish traditionally marginalized students so that practices reduce harm and increase connection.
- Responses to truancy should be considered to the extent to which policy and practices promote the lens of the Trauma-Sensitive Schools (TSS) guiding principles of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness.
- Relationships are foundational for positive conditions for learning and facilitate a student's sense of belonging. Attention should be paid to how responses to truancy increase a student's relationships between adults and peers and contribute to a sense of belonging in the school community.

★ Resource

- [Trauma-Sensitive Schools \(TSS\) online learning system](#)

Monitor Chronic Absence

Research has demonstrated **chronic absence** – missing 10 percent or more of a school year for *any* reason, excused or unexcused – has a significant impact on student achievement. Students who regularly miss school are:

- more likely to miss early learning milestones,
- less likely to graduate on time,
- more likely to drop out of school, and
- more likely to experience poor outcomes in adulthood (U.S. Department of Education 2016; Balfanz and Byrnes 2012).

The impact of frequently missing school on both students and communities emphasizes the need for targeted and effective attendance improvement interventions. **Interventions should bear in mind the impact of *any* absence on student performance and aim to not contribute (whether intentionally or unintentionally) to the larger issue of chronic absence.**

★ Resources

- [Addressing Chronic Absence - Attendance Works](#)
- [Improving Attendance and Reducing Chronic Absenteeism - Center on PBIS](#)

Collaborating with County Human Services

Understand the Importance of Matching Interventions to Youth Needs

Current YJ practice is guided by the principle of “desistance” – or an understanding that the vast majority of youth will grow out of delinquent behavior as they mature. In Wisconsin, YJ agencies strive to appropriately match intervention services to a youth's predicted risk of reoffending, as well as to their identified needs and strengths, to avoid over-serving youth (which has been found to be harmful).



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Truancy is considered a “status offense,” or an offense that if committed by an adult, would not be considered a criminal offense. School problems like truancy are a much stronger indicator of youth *needs* than of future delinquent behavior. **Research suggests the underlying needs of youth who commit status offenses are best met outside of the formal youth justice system** (Salsich and Trone 2013). Harsh sanctions – like out-of-home placement, denial of family welfare benefits, or sending police to the homes of students – are more likely to increase the incidence of truancy (Eastman et al. 2007; National Research Council 2013; Weber 2020).

Make Collaboration a Priority

The most effective approaches to truancy include families, schools, and communities, working together to set and consistently enforce rules for attendance. Establish a collaborative cross-agency group to meet proactively and regularly. You may wish to consider the following:

- What do Wisconsin statutes say we **can do** to address truancy?
- What does current best practice research tell us we **should do** to address truancy?
- **How** can we use the resources currently available to our community to address truancy?

★ Resources

- [Developing a Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\) for School Justice Partnerships: Technical Assistance Tools](#)
- Examples of Youth Justice and School Collaborations in Truancy Prevention, as found in the [DCF Youth Justice Issue Brief: Issue Brief Released on Truancy](#)

Truancy Committee and Plan

At least once every four years, in each county, the school district administrator of the school district which contains the county seat, or his or her designee, shall convene a committee to review and make recommendations to the school boards of all of the school districts in the county on revisions to the school districts' truancy plans under sub. (4m). Specific representatives of specific agencies must be included per statute ([Wis. Stat. § 118.162](#)).

Wisconsin-Specific Attendance Resources for Schools

- [DPI Guidance on Attendance in Online and Blended Learning Environments](#)
- [DPI's School Attendance Page](#)
- [Early Warning Drop Out System \(DEWS\)](#)
- [Answers to Frequently Asked Compulsory School Attendance Questions](#)
- [What Works Wisconsin Truancy Fact Sheet](#)

More information on Youth Justice and Truancy

This eBrief was developed in collaboration with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) in October 2021. Content included in this brief was adapted and reprinted with permission from DCF. A corresponding [Issue Brief on Truancy for Youth Justice](#) staff provides additional information.



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Best Practice Approaches to Truancy Reduction: Information for School Attendance Officers

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